



## Solvothermal synthesis of $\alpha$ -PbO from lead dioxide and its electrochemical performance as a positive electrode material

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### HIGHLIGHTS

- PbO can be prepared by a solvothermal reaction of PbO<sub>2</sub> within methanol.
- The prepared PbO can discharge a capacity of 165 mAh g<sup>-1</sup> at 5 mA g<sup>-1</sup>.
- The prepared PbO has the discharge capacity of 90 mAh g<sup>-1</sup> at 200 mA g<sup>-1</sup>.
- This paper shows a new way for the recycle of spent lead acid battery.

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### ABSTRACT

Lead acid batteries have been widely used and have dominated the global secondary battery market. It is very important to recycle the spent batteries efficiently to eliminate possible pollution and to ensure sustainable production. In this paper, we report our investigation on the solvothermal treatment of PbO<sub>2</sub>, which is one of the model compounds for the positive active mixture, in methanol and the subsequent calcination of its product. The results show that the solvothermal treatment of PbO<sub>2</sub> in pure methanol at 140 °C can produce a mixture of PbO and lead oxide carbonate, which can be calcined at a temperature below 500 °C to produce  $\alpha$ -PbO. The as-prepared PbO powders are rod-like particles of about 0.5 micrometer in diameter and several micrometers in length, which can achieve a high discharge capacity of 165 mAh g<sup>-1</sup> at the discharge current density of 5 mA g<sup>-1</sup>, and more than 90 mAh g<sup>-1</sup> at 200 mA g<sup>-1</sup> with excellent cycle stability. This study demonstrates a new way for the reuse of lead dioxide in spent lead acid batteries to produce highly active PbO.

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## 1. Introduction

Lead acid batteries have been widely used, dominating more than 50% share of the global secondary battery market [1]. Recently, the demand for lead acid batteries has steadily increased since electric bicycles and cars have become increasingly popular [2]. In 2010, the world's annual refined lead output reached up to 9.3 million tonnes of which about 86% was consumed in the manufacture of lead acid batteries [3,4].

Without a doubt, the wide use of lead acid batteries produces spent lead acid batteries in the same amount, and the toxicity of lead vitally requires that it be efficiently recovered from spent lead acid batteries. Spent lead acid batteries consist of four parts: 11–30 wt.%

electrolyte, 24–30 wt.% lead and lead alloy grid, 30–40 wt.% lead paste, and 7–10 wt.% organics. Lead paste is composed mostly of PbSO<sub>4</sub> and PbO<sub>2</sub>, and also a little amount of PbO and lead metal. This complexity of lead paste leads to many difficulties in the subsequent process [5,6]. Commercially, lead paste is usually reduced to metallic lead through a pyrometallurgical process. Due to the use of high temperatures (around 1000 °C), the traditional pyrometallurgical process is energy-exhaustive, and generates SO<sub>2</sub> gas and lead dust without desulfurization, especially in some underdeveloped areas. Thus, more and more attention is paid to a green recycling process for spent lead acid batteries, such as hydrometallurgical routes [7,8].

However, one question arises: why should we obtain lead metal rather than prepare PbO from the lead paste of spent lead acid batteries, as the lead has still to be oxidized to make PbO, exhausting more energy?

In 2009, the R.V. Kumar et al. at the University of Cambridge made one of the first attempts to produce lead oxide, which was

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supposed to be used as the active materials for lead acid batteries [9–11]. They reported that  $\text{PbSO}_4$ ,  $\text{PbO}_2$  and  $\text{PbO}$  could be treated with an aqueous solution of citric acid to generate lead citrate, which can be calcined to produce a fine  $\text{PbO}$  powder. It is a pity that the authors did not report any electrochemical property of their fine  $\text{PbO}$  powders.

At about the same time, we proposed a novel method to produce new secondary batteries from spent ones based on fully separated positive and negative active materials, from which subsequent chemical treatments were employed to produce new active materials [12–14]. As for the lead acid batteries, this method requires firstly the separation of positive plates from negative plates, which are then respectively treated to get only positive active material powders and negative active material powders, apart from their respective grid alloys. Secondly, both the positive and the negative active materials are chemically treated respectively to produce  $\text{PbO}$  for new batteries. It is known that the positive powders contain  $\text{PbO}_2$  and  $\text{PbSO}_4$ , while the negative ones contain  $\text{Pb}$ ,  $\text{PbSO}_4$  and some additives. Consequently, to produce  $\text{Pb(II)}$  compounds,  $\text{PbO}_2$  in the positive materials must be reduced, while  $\text{Pb}$  in the negative materials must be oxidized. The  $\text{Pb(II)}$  compounds formed during those reduction or oxidation processes are carbonated together with the  $\text{PbSO}_4$  in the original mixture to form  $\text{PbCO}_3$ , which is then calcined to obtain fine powders of  $\text{PbO}$  for the positive and negative electrodes respectively.

In the current lead acid battery industry, leady oxide is required for both negative and positive electrodes, which is then respectively converted to porous  $\text{Pb}$  and  $\text{PbO}_2$  during the formation. There are two dominant techniques to produce leady oxide, which are the ball-mill and the Barton-pot methods [15]. The utilization of those leady oxides is usually very low, which makes the specific energy density of lead acid batteries only 30–40  $\text{Wh kg}^{-1}$ . Therefore, it would be of interest to synthesize  $\text{PbO}$  to obtain a higher utilization and a longer cycle-life. For example, Wang et al. [16] prepared nanocrystalline  $\alpha$ - $\text{PbO}$  from calcination of  $\text{PbCO}_3$  and used it as the positive electrode active material. The results showed that the  $\alpha$ - $\text{PbO}$  discharged a capacity which was 30% higher than that of the conventional ball-milled leady oxide. Cruz et al. [17] prepared a thin  $\alpha$ - $\text{PbO}$  film through chemical spray pyrolysis of an aqueous solution of  $\text{Pb}(\text{CH}_3\text{COO})_2 \cdot 3\text{H}_2\text{O}$  on a lead substrate. When the film on the substrate was used as a positive plate, it maintained a discharge capacity of 100  $\text{mAh g}^{-1}$  upon extended cycling. Karami et al. [18,19] synthesized a uniform nano-structured lead oxide via a sonochemical method, which discharged a large capacity of 140  $\text{mAh g}^{-1}$  and even 230  $\text{mAh g}^{-1}$  as the cathode or anode of a lead acid battery. Salavati-Niasari et al. [20] also reported that the nano-size lead oxide powder with an average particle size of 35 nm could be prepared by decomposing lead oxalate at 500 °C, but no electrochemical results are reported. Therefore, it seems that nanoparticles of  $\text{PbO}$  may be more active in lead acid batteries.

In this paper, we will demonstrate the reduction of lead dioxide by solvothermal reactions in methanol. The products will be then calcined at relatively low temperatures to produce  $\alpha$ - $\text{PbO}$ , which is then tested as the positive electrode materials.

## 2. Experimental

### 2.1. Material preparation

The solvothermal reactions were carried out as follows: 20 mL of methanol (99.5%, Sinopharm Chemical Reagent Co., Ltd.) and 2.00 g of lead dioxide (99.7%, Aladdin Chemical Reagent Co., Ltd.) were added to a Teflon-lined stainless steel autoclave, which was heated at a temperature under stirring for a period of time. The yellow or orange solid obtained was filtered and dried.

For the investigation of the best reaction temperature, the reactions were carried out for 24 h at 60, 80, 100, 120, 140 and 160 °C respectively; for that of the best reaction time, they were carried out at 140 °C for 3, 6, 12, 18, 24 and 48 h respectively.

To prepare samples for the electrochemical studies, the solvothermal reaction was carried out at 140 °C for 24 h. The obtained solid was then calcined at 300, 350, 400, 450 °C for 1 h, respectively. The samples are sequentially denoted as A, B, C and D.

### 2.2. Characterization

Powder X-ray diffraction (XRD) patterns of the samples were measured on a Bruker D8 Discover instrument operating at 40 kV and 20 mA, by using  $\text{CuK}\alpha$  radiation ( $\lambda = 0.15406 \text{ nm}$ ). The phase compositions were determined by the software Jade. Scanning electron micrographs (SEM) of samples were taken on a Hitachi S-4800 microscope. The thermogravimetric analysis (TG) of the precursor was conducted on a TA Instruments SDT-Q600 in static air with a rate of 10 °C  $\text{min}^{-1}$ .

### 2.3. Electrode preparation

1.0 g of the as-prepared sample (A, B, C, or D) was placed in a container, and then 0.003 g of fibres, 0.003 g of graphite, 0.124 mL of water and 0.11 mL of  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  (36 wt.%) were added to it slowly. The amount of water added could be slightly modified to obtain the required density (4.0 g  $\text{mL}^{-1}$ ). The plates were obtained by applying the paste evenly onto a  $\text{Pb-Ca}$  alloy grid with dimensions of 10 × 8 × 2 mm<sup>3</sup>.

The plates were then immersed in sulfuric acid of 8 wt.% for 5 s. After that, they were put into an oven, maintaining at a temperature of 100 °C for 5 min, and then put in a water bath, lowering the temperature to 75 °C with relative humidity >95%. The curing was conducted for 24 h. After that, the plates were dried at 70 °C for 48 h. The mass of the active material was the mass of the dried plate minus that of the blank grid.

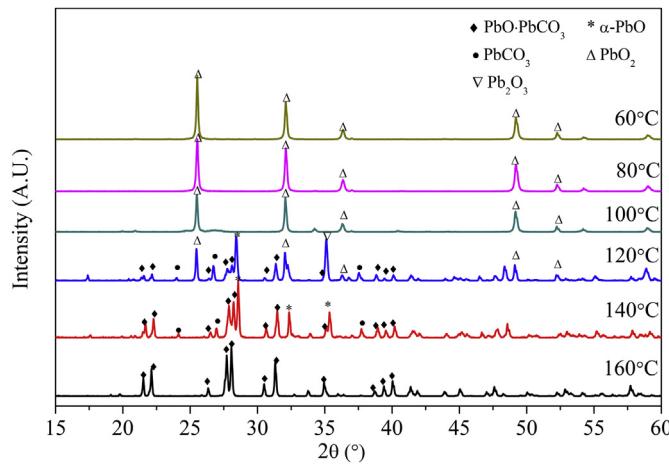
### 2.4. Electrochemical performance test

All the formation and the cycling tests were carried out with an NEWARE Cycler (BTS-5V3A Shenzhen NEWARE Electronics Co., Ltd., China). The positive plate was assembled with a commercial negative plate (the area is about 3 times the size of the positive plate) and separated by absorptive glass-mat (AGM). The electrodes were assembled into a case and the electrolyte was a  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  solution with a relative density of 1.23 g  $\text{mL}^{-1}$ .

After the plate had been soaked for 2 h, the battery formation was started. The formation was divided into 3 steps. Firstly, the electrode was charged at a current density of 15  $\text{mA cm}^{-2}$  to 100  $\text{mAh g}^{-1}$ ; then it was charged at 25  $\text{mA cm}^{-2}$  for another 150  $\text{mAh g}^{-1}$ ; and finally, it was charged at 8  $\text{mA cm}^{-2}$  for another 100  $\text{mAh g}^{-1}$ . Since the negative electrode had a much larger capacity than the positive electrode, the cell capacity was restricted by the positive electrode.

After formation, the cell was discharged at 5  $\text{mA g}^{-1}$  until the voltage fell to 1.75 V. Then it was used for cycling tests. The electrode was first charged at 50  $\text{mA g}^{-1}$  until the cell voltage reached 2.45 V, then it was charged at 25  $\text{mA g}^{-1}$  until 110% of the first discharge capacity after formation was charged. The electrode was then discharged at a current density of 50  $\text{mA g}^{-1}$ . This was done for 50 cycles.

The cyclic voltammetry (CV) was carried out on the CorrTest model CS350 electrochemical working station (WUHAN CORRTTEST Instrument Co., Ltd., China). The CV curves were determined with a typical three-electrode system. The working electrode was the as-



**Fig. 1.** XRD patterns of solvothermal products at different reaction temperatures for 24 h. The phases are identified according to the JCPDS files: PbO·PbCO<sub>3</sub> (48-1888),  $\alpha$ -PbO (72-151), PbCO<sub>3</sub> (52-1527), PbO<sub>2</sub> (89-2805) and Pb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> (2-539).

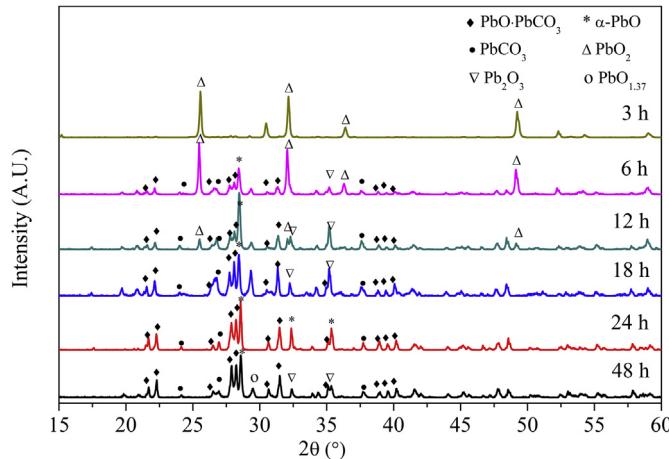
prepared electrode, and a double platinum electrode was used as the counter electrode while the Hg/Hg<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>/K<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub> (sat.) was employed as the reference electrode. Sulfuric acid (36 wt.%) was used as electrolyte. The measurement was carried out at a potential scan rate of 10 mV s<sup>-1</sup> from 0 to 1.7 V.

### 3. Results and discussion

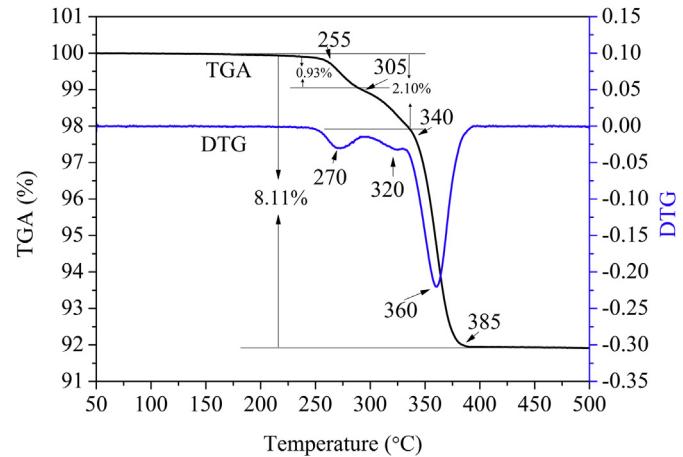
#### 3.1. The solvothermal reaction of lead dioxide in methanol

It is known that PbO<sub>2</sub> is a strong oxidant; therefore we have tried to use CH<sub>3</sub>OH as the reductant. Experiments carried out at temperatures below the boiling point of methanol failed, therefore, we tried to let them react at higher temperatures in a closed vessel. The following is what we found.

Fig. 1 shows the XRD patterns of the solvothermal products at different reaction temperatures. It has been found that lead dioxide does not basically react with methanol under 100 °C. As the temperature is elevated to 120 °C, both  $\alpha$ -PbO and PbO·PbCO<sub>3</sub> are formed, but PbO<sub>2</sub> still remains. At 140 °C, PbO<sub>2</sub> can no longer be identified, and both  $\alpha$ -PbO and PbO·PbCO<sub>3</sub> are found in the products. At 160 °C, PbO·PbCO<sub>3</sub> is the only product identified. As this



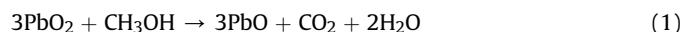
**Fig. 2.** XRD patterns of solvothermal products produced at 140 °C at different time. The phases are identified according to the JCPDS files: PbO·PbCO<sub>3</sub> (48-1888),  $\alpha$ -PbO (72-151), PbCO<sub>3</sub> (52-1527),  $\beta$ -PbO<sub>2</sub> (89-2805), Pb<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> (2-539) and PbO<sub>1.37</sub> (27-1202).



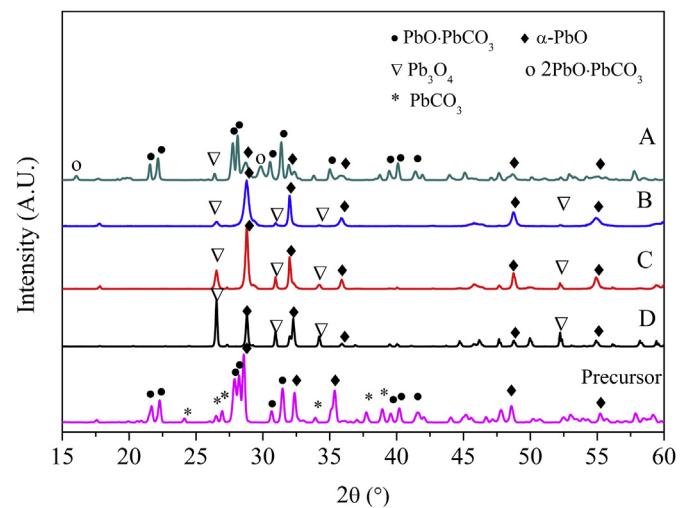
**Fig. 3.** TG–DTG curves of precursor after reacted at 140 °C for 24 h.

research is to prepare  $\alpha$ -PbO, we have further studied reactions at 140 °C, without using other temperatures to eliminate energy consumption.

Fig. 2 shows the XRD patterns of the solvothermal products produced at 140 °C for different time. It is found that  $\alpha$ -PbO and PbO·PbCO<sub>3</sub> are identified after 6 h, but PbO<sub>2</sub> disappears only after 18 h. It could be noticed that  $\alpha$ -PbO occupies a bigger fraction than PbO·PbCO<sub>3</sub>, but after 24 h, the composition seems to stabilize, and the products are getting crystallized better. This may mean that the solvothermal reaction of lead dioxide and methanol may firstly produce PbO, and then PbO reacted with CO<sub>2</sub> from the full-oxidation of methanol to form PbO·PbCO<sub>3</sub>:



Therefore, the final product is a mixture of PbO and PbO·PbCO<sub>3</sub> as the molar ratio of PbO and CO<sub>2</sub> in product is 3 to 1 (reaction



**Fig. 4.** XRD patterns of samples A, B, C, D, which were prepared from the calcination of the precursor at 300 °C, 350 °C, 400 °C and 450 °C for one hour, respectively. The phases are identified according to the JCPDS files: PbO·PbCO<sub>3</sub> (48-1888),  $\alpha$ -PbO (72-151), Pb<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub> (73-532), 2PbO·PbCO<sub>3</sub> (17-731) and PbCO<sub>3</sub> (52-1527).

**Table 1**

The composition of the samples B, C and D.

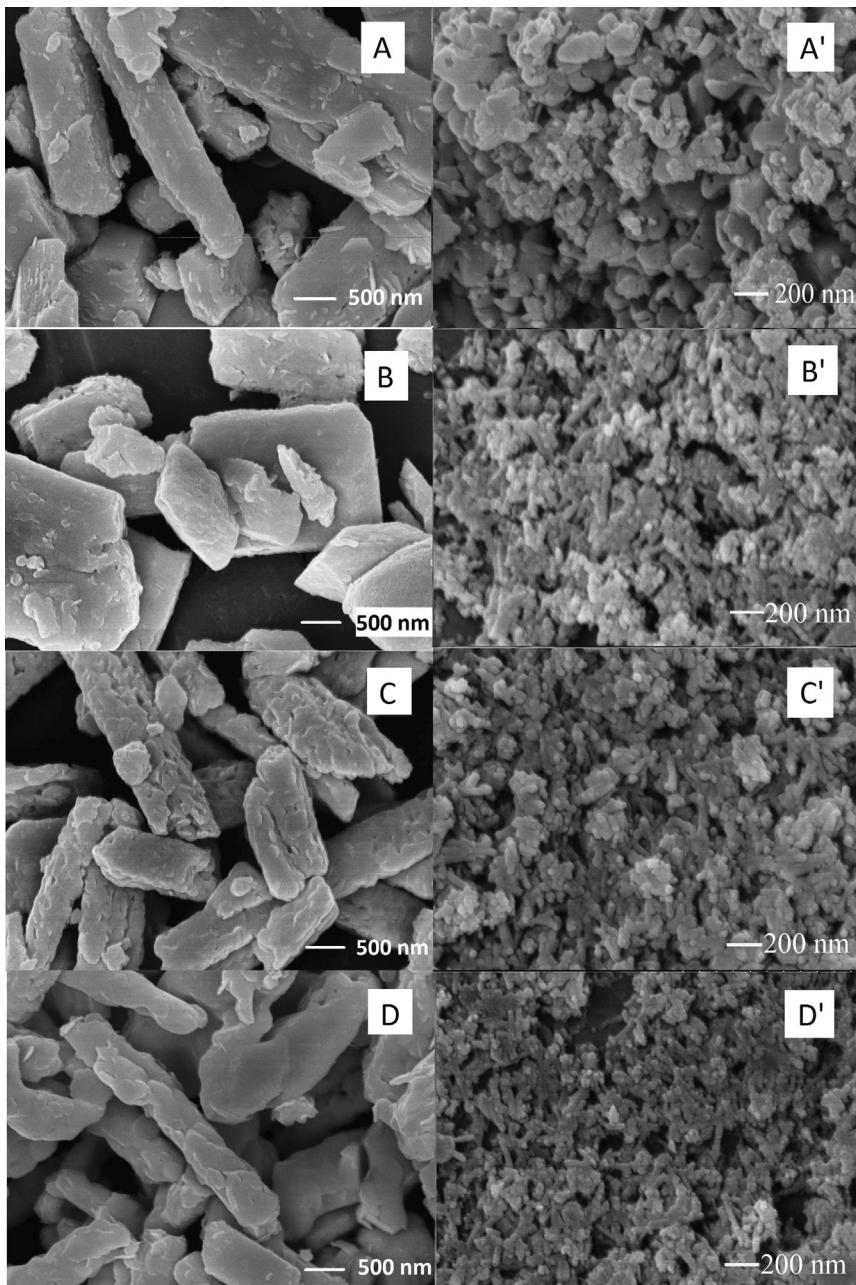
Sample	Composition (wt.%) <sup>a</sup>	
	PbO	Pb <sub>3</sub> O <sub>4</sub>
B	90.7	9.3
C	86.1	13.9
D	73.4	26.6

<sup>a</sup> The compositions were determined according to the XRD patterns shown in Fig. 4 with the software Jade.

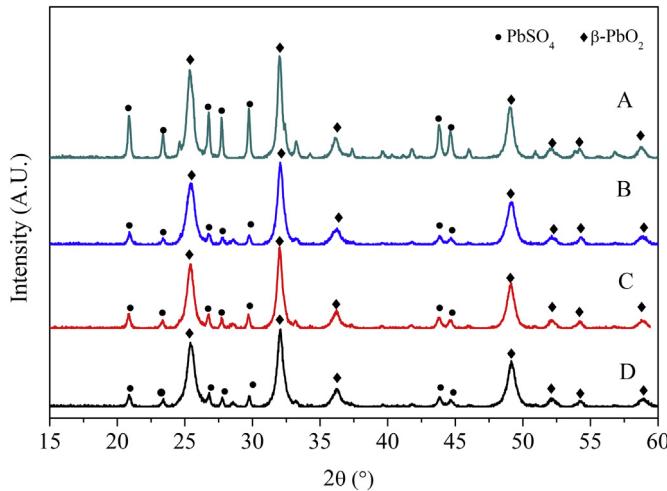
(1)). Because the well-crystallized sample may not be suitable for the fine powder of PbO, so we decide to carry out the reaction at 140 °C for 24 h, and the product will be marked as precursor hereafter.

### 3.2. The preparation of the samples and their formation in positive electrode of a lead acid battery

PbO must be obtained for the electrochemical investigations. Therefore, we investigated the pyrolysis of the precursor. Fig. 3 shows the TG–DTG curves in static air of the precursor obtained from the solvothermal reaction between PbO<sub>2</sub> and methanol at 140 °C for 24 h. As it is shown, there are three losses of mass at around 270, 320 and 360 °C. Fig. 4 shows the XRD patterns of the products after the precursor being calcined at 300, 350, 400 and 450 °C for one hour respectively. It can be noticed that there are PbO·PbCO<sub>3</sub>, 2PbO·PbCO<sub>3</sub> and PbO in the sample obtained at 300 °C, but there are mainly PbO and Pb<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub> in the samples obtained at the temperatures higher than 350 °C; also, the amount of Pb<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub> increases as the temperature goes up (Table 1).



**Fig. 5.** SEM micrographs of the samples before (A, B, C, D) and after (A', B', C', D') formation at temperatures of (A, A') 300 °C, (B, B') 350 °C, (C, C') 400 °C, (D, D') 450 °C.



**Fig. 6.** XRD patterns of the four samples after formation. They are indexed according to JCPDS files:  $\beta\text{-PbO}_2$  (89-2805) and  $\text{PbSO}_4$  (5-577).

It has been known that  $\text{PbCO}_3$  decomposes in three steps between 180 and 350 °C (reactions (4)–(6)) [21], and the precursor is a mixture of  $\text{PbO}\cdot\text{PbCO}_3$ ,  $\alpha\text{-PbO}$  and  $\text{PbCO}_3$ . Combined with Fig. 4, it can be concluded that reactions (4) and (5) are the main reactions in the range of 255–340 °C, and after that, reactions (6) and (7) become dominant. It is known that  $\text{PbO}$  can be oxidized in air, and it can certainly be accelerated at higher temperatures:

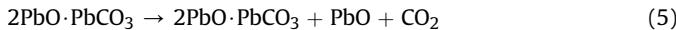
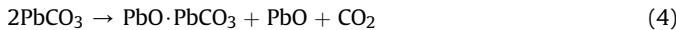


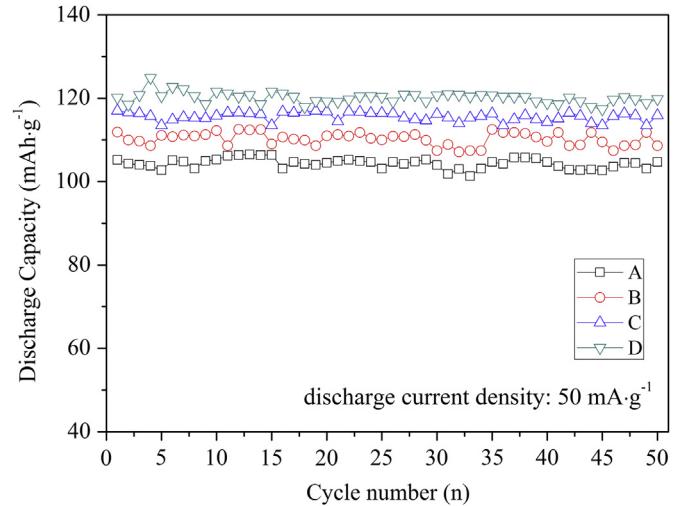
Fig. 5 shows the SEM images of the four samples, together with that of the samples after the electrode formation. It shows that samples calcined at 300, 400 and 450 °C are rod-like particles with dimensions of 0.5  $\mu\text{m}$  in diameter and 2–3  $\mu\text{m}$  in length. However, the sample calcined at 350 °C looks like micro-flakes. This may be related to that the decomposition of  $\text{PbCO}_3$  reaches its highest rate (Fig. 3), which may enable the growth of the crystals. However, when the temperatures are either below or above 350 °C, it is possible that the diffusion required by growth of crystals is either too slow in speed or too short in time, which makes the morphology inherit that of the precursor.

To observe the morphology changes of the sample after formation, the active materials were peeled from the electrode after formation, and then grinded for SEM observations. It can be seen that the particles become much smaller after formation, but the heritage of morphology of the precursor is clear. This is because the cure process and the formation makes  $\text{PbO}$  transform into  $\text{PbSO}_4$ , then  $\text{PbO}_2$  and there are substantial changes in chemical structures.

**Table 2**

The contents of  $\text{PbO}_2$  after formation determined by the software Jade.

Temperature of calcination of the precursor (°C)	Contents of $\beta\text{-PbO}_2$ (wt.%)
300	88.7
350	93.8
400	94.4
450	94.6

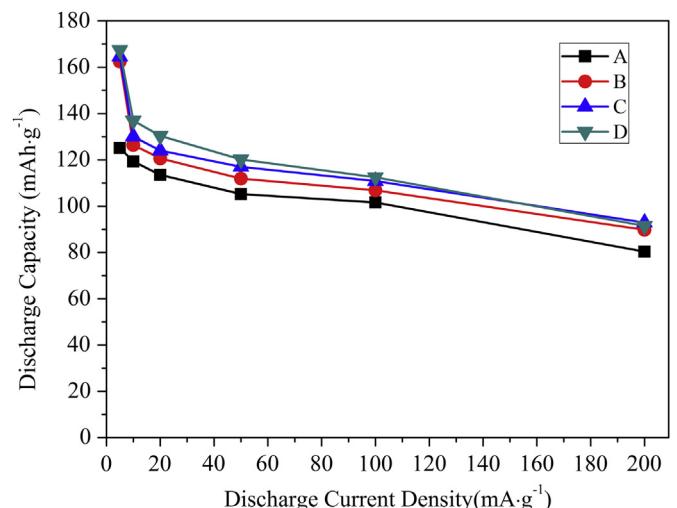


**Fig. 7.** The discharge capacity of the four samples at different calcination temperatures versus cycle number.

According to the XRD patterns of the samples after formation in Fig. 6, all the four samples contain both  $\beta\text{-PbO}_2$  and  $\text{PbSO}_4$ . According to the software Jade, the content of  $\text{PbO}_2$  increases as the calcination temperature increases (Table 2), and the amount of  $\text{PbSO}_4$  in sample A is much higher than that in the others. Combined with Table 1 and Fig. 4, it could be concluded that a higher amount of existence of  $\text{Pb}_3\text{O}_4$  may enhance the formation. This is in accordance with the general knowledge on this particulate issue [22–24].

### 3.3. Electrochemical performance of the prepared samples

Fig. 7 shows the cyclic performance of the four samples, in which the discharge current density was 50 mA g<sup>-1</sup>. It can be seen that the capacity of the four samples is quite stable within the 50 cycles, and the discharge capacity for the sample prepared at 300 °C is about 105 mAh g<sup>-1</sup>, and the others obtained at 350, 400 and 450 °C are about 110, 116 and 120 mAh g<sup>-1</sup>, respectively. The values of discharge capacities are paralleled to the content of  $\text{Pb}_3\text{O}_4$  in the samples as well as that of  $\beta\text{-PbO}_2$  in the samples after formation.



**Fig. 8.** Discharge capacity versus the current density of the four samples.

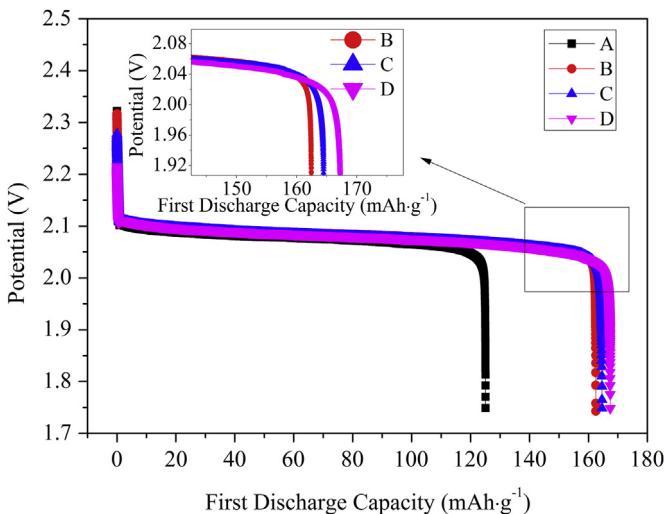


Fig. 9. The curves of potential versus first discharge capacity of the four samples.

Fig. 8 shows the curves of discharge capacity versus the current density. As expected, the discharge capacity decreases as the current density increases, the other samples discharge more than  $90 \text{ mAh g}^{-1}$  at the current density of  $200 \text{ mA g}^{-1}$ , except sample A.

Fig. 9 gives the first discharge curves of potential versus capacity at a current density of  $5 \text{ mA g}^{-1}$ . As evidence in that, the first discharge capacity of the sample A is about  $125 \text{ mAh g}^{-1}$ , while those of the other three samples are more than  $160 \text{ mAh g}^{-1}$ . Here, the utilization of active material is defined as the ratio of the discharge capacity and the corresponding theoretical capacity of PbO. The theoretical capacity of pure PbO is  $240 \text{ mAh g}^{-1}$ . The utilizations of the four samples are about 52, 67, 68 and 70%, respectively. To best of our knowledge, that is the second highest discharge capacity in lead acid batteries if lead monoxide is used in the first place as the positive electrode material.

The calcined products are also examined by cyclic voltammetry, which give the similar results to those of Visscher [25]. Fig. 10 shows the CV curves of the four samples after the 25th cycle. It can be seen that the oxidation of  $\text{PbSO}_4$  to  $\text{PbO}_2$  occurs at  $1.25 \text{ V}$  (vs.  $\text{Hg}/\text{Hg}_2\text{SO}_4$  in sat.  $\text{K}_2\text{SO}_4$ ), the evolution of oxygen occurs beyond  $1.4 \text{ V}$ , and the reduction of  $\text{PbO}_2$  to  $\text{PbSO}_4$  is at  $0.93 \text{ V}$ . All the CV curves are similar, and the cathode current is much higher than the anode current.

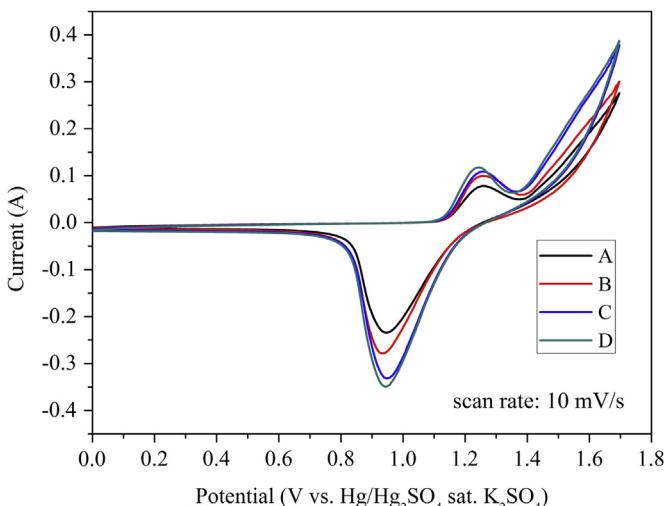


Fig. 10. Cyclic voltammetry curves of the four samples.

#### 4. Conclusion

The  $\text{PbO}_2$  can be reduced to  $\alpha\text{-PbO}$  in methanol in a closed vessel at  $140 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  for 24 h, and some of the methanol is fully oxidized to form  $\text{CO}_2$ . The resulted material (the precursor) is a mixture of  $\text{PbO}$ ,  $\text{PbO}\cdot\text{PbCO}_3$  and  $\text{PbCO}_3$ , because the  $\text{CO}_2$  reacts with  $\alpha\text{-PbO}$  to produce  $\text{PbO}\cdot\text{PbCO}_3$  and  $\text{PbCO}_3$ .

Calcination of the precursor at  $300 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  produces a mixture of  $\alpha\text{-PbO}$ ,  $\text{PbO}\cdot\text{PbCO}_3$ ,  $2\text{PbO}\cdot\text{PbCO}_3$ , and small amount of  $\text{Pb}_3\text{O}_4$ ; calcination of the precursor at  $350$ ,  $400$  or  $450 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  can eliminate the carbonates. That is, only  $\alpha\text{-PbO}$  and  $\text{Pb}_3\text{O}_4$  are observed in the mixture. Moreover, the amount of the  $\text{Pb}_3\text{O}_4$  increases with the temperature. Except for the sample calcined at  $350 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ , which is flake-like in morphology, all the others are rod-like. After formation, those particles become much smaller, but still in similar.

The results of the electrochemical performance of the four samples show that the sample obtained at  $450 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  has the largest discharges capacity, which is  $165 \text{ mAh g}^{-1}$  at  $5 \text{ mA g}^{-1}$ , and  $90 \text{ mAh g}^{-1}$  at  $200 \text{ mA g}^{-1}$ ; and the sample obtained at  $300 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  is the worst, which is  $125 \text{ mAh g}^{-1}$  at  $5 \text{ mA g}^{-1}$ , and  $80 \text{ mAh g}^{-1}$  at  $200 \text{ mA g}^{-1}$ . The discharge capacities of samples obtained at  $350$  and  $400 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$  are more than  $160 \text{ mAh g}^{-1}$  at  $5 \text{ mA g}^{-1}$ , and around  $90 \text{ mAh g}^{-1}$  at  $200 \text{ mA g}^{-1}$ . All the four samples behave excellently in terms of cyclic stability, their capacity loss are less than 1% in 50 cycles when they are fully discharged at  $50 \text{ mA g}^{-1}$ .

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